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MISCONCEPTIONS IN EROTIC FOLKLORE

THE COLLECTING of erotic folklore has only recently come to interest the world of folklore scholarship in the English-speaking countries. In Russia, Germany, France, and Italy, the material was collected and completely published long ago—between 1865 and 1914 at the latest—and is now not considered of any except historical interest. The compilers were in most cases the greatest folklorists of their respective cultures: Afanasyev, Krauss, Gaston Pâris, and Pitrè, among dozens of others. At least two very serious yearbook publications, *Anthropophytéia* (Leipzig, 1904-31), and *Kryptádia* (Paris, 1883-1911), were issued over a period of decades, running to some forty volumes, and solely devoted to the erotic folklore and folksong of all European languages, except English. Unfortunately, there are not ten complete sets of these publications, and their various *beiwërke*, in any American or British public and university libraries; and of the few sets that do exist in these countries, the pages have in most cases not been cut. British and American folklorists, and especially folksong collectors, are now waking up to the existence of sex, two World Wars late, ill-prepared—being in general either too timid or too avid—and almost entirely ignorant of what has already been done, of how it was done, and, as a matter of fact, why it was done. No one can have any scientific idea of what sexual folklore is all about, of what to look for, or what any of it *means*, until the forty volumes just mentioned have been thoroughly explored. This is a very serious recommendation to the English-speaking folklorists, who are, to put it plainly, in the position of Johnny-come-latelys in this field, and looking for orientation.

The European collectors, especially those grouped around Krauss in Vienna, never for an instant made the slightest pretense. Erotic folklore is to be collected for the same reason that it is proliferated: because it is about sex. That is what makes it interesting both to the “oral source” and to the collector—who is supposed to be a human being, with all the organs and impulses of a human being—that is what makes it socially valuable and historically important. Sex, and its folklore, are far more interesting, more valuable, and more important in every social and historical sense than, for instance, the balladry of murder, cruelty, torture, treachery, baby-killing, and so forth, which are the principal contents, to give only one familiar example, of the Child ballads; of which the almost total moral depravity, on all counts *except* that of sex, and fantastic unfitness for retailing to impressionable minds, has seldom been observed, owing to these particular ballads’ lily-white purity as to sex.

What is more serious than the contradiction and the insincerity implicit here is the unspoken motive behind much of the present interest in the hitherto taboo sexual folklore. Anglo-American folklorists and folksong collectors are now hesitantly emerging from their parthenogenetic stage, not because of any significant liberalization of the famously antisexual Anglo-Saxon morality (that allows American postmasters, today, to stamp outgoing letters: REPORT OBSCENE MAIL

TO YOUR POSTMASTER), but rather because of the unspoken and entirely erroneous belief that the "vein" is just about worked out for every *other* kind of folklore. This basic misconception skews, and makes very equivocal, the entire show of interest.

The idea that there is a special kind of folklore that is sexual, as differentiated from all other kinds, is an optical illusion caused by the operation of a purely literary censorship. No such separation exists in fact. In the field, the sexual material is offered along with all the other material. It is not segregated into a special behind-the-barn session, or Jim Crow appendix, unless the attitude of the collector puts it there—generally by "forgetting" to ask specifically for it, though never forgetting to ask for Child ballads. The sexual materials grow out of the ordinary life situation, and satisfy some of the most imperative and deep-seated fantasy needs of the informants. The more extraordinary or abnormal, therefore, the collecting or recording session is made, by the presence, by the personality, or by the sexual anxieties of the collector himself, the less likely that the informants' sexual materials will appear. That is a principal reason why they have been so uncommon in the past, in English, or have been collected only in caricatural form.

Sexual folklore almost always has the air of being humorous. Yet actually it concerns some of the most pressing fears and most destructive life problems of the people who tell the jokes and sing the songs. Their sexual humor is a sort of whistling in the dark, like Beaumarchais' Figaro, who "laughs so that he may not cry." They are projecting the endemic sexual fears, and problems, and defeats of their culture—in which there are very few victories for anyone—on certain standard comedy figures and situations, such as cuckoldry, seduction, impotence, homosexuality, castration, and disease, which are obviously not humorous at all. And they are almost always expressing their resistance to authority figures, such as parents, priests, and policemen, in stereotyped forms of sexual satire and scatological pranks and vocabulary. It is for these reasons that sexual folklore is generally retailed in a mood of exaggerated horseplay and fun. That mood cannot be created by giving a singer or joke-teller three drinks and a free cigarette (which is all the pay he usually ever gets, by the way; the rest of the profits, copyright, and so forth going to the collector), and then turning on a tape recording machine, while the collector goes outside and sleeps, or pops into a control booth and makes faces at the singer. The collecting of folksong in the last century, in England and America, was done for the most part by retired clergymen and Sunday School music teachers, many of them women; and in Russia and France by democratic-minded noblemen. In this century it is being done by college professors, all of whom have to be referred to as "Doctor." No one can relax under those circumstances.

This brings up another, and very damaging, misconception as to folklore in general, and sexual folklore in particular. Folklore and folksong are now, for some reason, taken for granted as the perquisite of what might be called the old maids of the English departments in the universities—that is to say, those faculty members not specializing in Chaucer or Shakespeare—though folklore is evidently more properly the domain of the faculties of anthropology and psychology, where some formal training for the work would also probably be demanded. Folksong collecting is today the only anthropological specialty in the hands of largely untrained personnel and hobbyists. This is particularly evident in the pitiful reduplication and ignorance of most of the headnotes written since those of Child and his successor,

George Lyman Kittredge, and of certain very exceptional scholars such as Phillips Barry, and Belden, Rollins, and Mackenzie. The rest of the published collections are of an insularity that passes belief—making almost no reference whatsoever to the tremendous European literature painfully indicated to them by Child and Kittredge, and more recently by Archer Taylor. They also betray only the most rudimentary historical sense, and that only occasionally, no song or ballad, no matter how ancient, ever being traced earlier than the American Civil War, or to the train wrecks, public hangings, and New Orleans' cribs of the 1900's, if that. Now that a few indexes have been published, in particular those of Laws, one may hope for better: that is to say, Laws will be cited, or his research silently appropriated as a headnote, and all will be as before.

The problem of untrained hobbyist personnel, self-appointed to the work, is especially acute in the case of sexual folklore, for which nothing in the training of the average English teacher can be said particularly to fit him, or her, except perhaps the creation and promulgation of bawdy limericks—a type of folk poetry almost solely existing among the college group, professors and students alike. Bawdy limericks apparently represent for the educated group a sort of private revolt against the rules of prosody and propriety, at one and the same time, owing to the false accent with which most limericks begin, the improper geographical rhyme, and the gruelingly obscene subject matter, which is usually of a far more alembicated nastiness than folksong ever is. Concomitantly, however, the public pronouncements and printed publications of none of the members of an American college faculty—with or without tenure—have ever been, and it is difficult to believe that they are now suddenly to become, as free in the matter of sexual content as, for instance, the average paperback, for sale at the price of a chocolate soda in the campus drugstore.

During the great days of folklore collecting in Britain and America—which are now definitely over, despite all wishful pretenses and the propaganda of the phonograph record business—it was not possible to print in full the erotic material, and most collectors therefore did not bother to transcribe it, or did so in a very perfunctory way, in connection with the (praise God!) uncensorable music, to which they then faked and published sentimental texts of their own concoction, the music also being doctored, as is well known. The amateur collector, Alfred Williams, who did not do any faking, mentions very honestly in his *Folk-Songs of the Upper Thames* (London, 1923), that, instead, he simply refused to collect what he knew he could not print. The same was also done, but not so candidly, by the better trained and therefore less pardonable British collectors, such as Cecil Sharp and Sabine Baring-Gould, and by all American collectors almost without exception until about 1940, who have riotously faked and expurgated their sexual materials as published, and who are still doing so. One striking example is the *Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore*—the principal monument of American folklore collecting, with the exception of the journals—now preparing its seventh volume, under as many editors, all of whom have so far left it for the reviewers to observe that the materials are expurgated to the hilt. That is not an honorable way to collect or to publish folklore. The most that can be said for it is that it is an interesting hobby, like mounting cancelled postage stamps or dead butterflies in albums, or collecting one Child ballad in each county of the state of Virginia.

One further and very important point about expurgated folklore is this: it is guaranteed not to get anyone dismissed from his university job. The expurgation of

folklore, or the simple refusal to collect it complete, is a sort of quiet dishonesty that makes printable books and articles out of what would otherwise be unpublishable manuscripts. Even if there is no direct monetary profit in articles published in learned journals, and monographs published by university presses, they do tend to improve the compiler's standing. "Unprintable" books—especially if they somehow get printed—are more than likely to jeopardize that standing. I do not think there is any misconception involved here, but the point has very little to do with folklore. It partakes, rather, of the ethical problem of the now vast and encroaching commercial miasma that Richard M. Dorson, writing ten years ago, has deathlessly called *fakelore*.

There is a profound moral contradiction here—not just for a bishop such as the protofaker, Thomas Percy, in the eighteenth century, or a clergyman such as Baring-Gould in the nineteenth, but for anyone—that forgery is all right, but that sex is all wrong. This is the identical contradiction that has brought folklore and folksong scholarship in the English-speaking world to the impasse implied in the present resolution, to examine, in 1960, the interesting subject of "Obscenity in Folk Literature," after 240 years of castrated publication of such literature, in England and America, beginning with the *Tea-Table Miscellany* of Allan Ramsay in 1724.

II

Fortunately, it does not matter in the slightest degree, to folklore and folksong, what is printed in commercial and university publications, and what is left out. This important fact, which people who live too much with books sometimes lose sight of, was very aptly expressed by A. H. Gayton in the *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* in 1942, nailing a similar misconception as to Indian folklore:

The idea that writing has affected European folklore attributes exaggerated importance to an almost irrelevant fact: the fact that broadsides and songsters, collections of fables, etc., have perpetuated in print the products of a purely oral tradition, of an un-literate art. The printed record of folksongs and folktales has been and is of importance, not so much to the folk themselves as to the folklorist investigating the nature and history of these cultural phenomena.

This means that scholarly publications are published for scholars. They have had, until recently, no other audience and no other real influence—particularly not on the folk. An anomalous situation has been created today by the phonograph recording, and the resultant avalanche of fake folksingers, and folk fakelorists, and other folk, all of them strictly out for the dollar, and feeding back to captive audiences the folksong and folklore which they hack together from the "hard-back" compilations (of which they are now all great buyers and in some cases producers). What needs to be said about this infestation of hard characters and promoters—and *not* under the euphemism of "revival singers"—has been said by the present writer, in the magazine *Sing Out!* for October 1960, with a few further words under the title "Who Owns Folklore?" in *Western Folklore*, XXI (1962), 1-12.

Nevertheless, whether the audience is a private one, of other folklorists, or must now include the phonograph-record purveyors—who are already complaining that the Sharp and Baring-Gould manuscripts turned out to be pretty tame when finally published (the record is called *RAP-A-TAP-TAP: English Folk Songs Miss Pringle*

Never Taught Us, and is in truth abysmal stuff, dismally sung)—there is no real reason now why scholars should not take upon themselves the freedom to tell the same truth about folklore and folksong, in learned journals and university publications of rather limited circulation after all, that can be learned by anyone who will stop to listen to eleven-year-old schoolchildren on the street corners of Philadelphia, or anywhere else. Who is being protected by the self-imposed censorship? Usually the excuse is that it is for the protection of children—unless their name happens to be Lolita. Then aging gentlemen are incited to seduce them in best sellers. In the present case, the children are the ones who have the folklore. They entrust it to university professors, and then the professors have to protect each other from even suspecting that it exists. What would actually happen if this pusillanimous structure of falsification and absurdity were simply allowed to collapse?

We are treading here on the practical problem, not of obscenity as a moral transgression but as a tactical blunder; of practical people who do not intend to risk their jobs over what the present writer has heard referred to—in reference to himself—as “a quixotic crusade for filth.” If that were the case, there would be no point whatsoever in discussing the possibility of liberalizing publication in the journals and so on. No such possibility would exist. Sex is now becoming a sort of bandwagon, since Kinsey, in line with the new and total American materialism, and people are jumping on. They can also easily be scared into jumping off, if their material position is endangered. There are no dirty words in Kinsey. It is all done with IBM machines, and the answers come out in graphs. No one can lose his job over that. But you cannot tidy up “The Bastard King of England” and “Christopher Columbo” with an IBM machine.

It is not a secret that the present writer is engaged in editing, for publication in France, a series of volumes intended to include the entire body of English-language folklore and folksong left out of the usual collections as “unprintable.” This material was collected for twenty years singlehanded, but recently it has been possible to have the assistance of other collectors in Great Britain and the United States. Unfortunately, the fact of leaving out all these materials before means that they have to be put together all at once now. That makes the kind of volume no member of the Modern Language Association and the American Folklore Society seems to want to be associated with in print, though several members of both have been so very kind as to send some fabulous materials collected in their salad days.

If it had been possible for these materials to be published calmly, years ago, properly interspersed among the printed collections in which they belong—and that is the only intelligent and courageous way to do it in the future—this embarrassment would not now arise. The independent collector, Vance Randolph, who has shown more courage than all the rest of them put together since David Herd in 1769, was not allowed by the State Historical Society of Missouri, recently, to include his unparalleled erotic materials in the four volumes of his published *Ozark Folksongs*. The magnificent “unprintable” collection he was left with has therefore remained simply an unpublishable manuscript in the Library of Congress and the Institute for Sex Research at Indiana University, with microfilm copies elsewhere. The so-called “unprintable” folksongs and poems of the Randolph collection will now be published in connection with the series just mentioned. Dozens of other collectors have also sent material, but almost invariably with the proviso that they must never be mentioned, not even by their initials. Several have even had the candor to explain, almost

in the same words, as did one fine old man, the late Josiah Combs: "I collected these songs when I was a gay young blade. I am getting on in years now, and I cannot afford to jeopardize my position." That tells the story.

As a matter of fact, the danger of "jeopardizing one's position" is not as great as seems to be believed. Twenty years ago, a private scholar, James Masterson, in his *Tall Tales of Arkansas*, published several unexpurgated texts of the unabashedly obscene "Change the Name of Arkansaw!" speech, attributed to Mark Twain, in the notes to the chapter where they logically belonged, and in the ordinary way of publication. Heaven did not fall. Masterson did not lose his job. There is also no record that *PMLA* and the Oxford University Press had to go out of business because of DeLancey Ferguson's transcripts of Burns's *Merry Muses* songs, or "Poor Bodies Do Naething But Mōw," in Burns's *Selected Letters*—a popular edition (1953), page 331. It does not appear, further, that the *JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLKLORE* had to cease publication because of Anna K. Stimson's "Cries of Defiance" in 1945, Waterman's article on obscenity in intellectual circles in 1949, or Dorson's folktale in 1951 about the man with an "oversized organ," who "met his death when, asleep in an upper bunk, his outsized member fell over the side and the weight pulled poor Charlie crashing to the floor." (I leave the motif-number, in the Thompson Index, for someone else to find.)

One must admit that the journal articles so far printed do not so much *present* folklore, as comment upon it, and deliver it up in neo-Latin paraphrases. The same is true of the present writer's study of castration jokes, in *Neurotica*, in 1951, as of almost all the remarkably freely-treated erotic material published in the psychological and anthropological journals and monographs, where folklore has always fared so much better than in the English departments. On the other hand, as far as mere vocabulary is concerned, no book more verbally obscene exists in the English language than the "Antwerp," 1680, edition of the *Poems* of the Earl of Rochester, yet this was republished by the Princeton University Press, ten years ago, in exact facsimile, on paper watermarked—for some reason—"Private Papers of Thomas Jefferson." Perhaps this was intended as the Declaration of Independence of American university press publishing. In effect, that is what it was.

III

The point was raised before, that whatever future there may be for folklore study in its recent marriage with psychoanalysis and socio-analysis, the suspicion has been growing, over the last twenty-five years that American ballad and folksong collecting is through, that there is nothing left to collect, or that the "quality" of what can now be collected does not make it worthwhile. Why does this seem such a threat? To the degree that it is true—and there is more in it than many collectors care to admit—it simply means that the job of American folksong specialists, as in England and the rest of Europe long since, has now moved on to something more difficult: that the shotgun collecting phase has now to give way, and the indexing and actual study have got to begin. Collecting cannot be continued indefinitely simply by jumping off now into the erotic supplement or for-men-only outhouse. In any case, it is certain that the new erotic materials now being created, and the limping remnants of the old, available to current collecting, are not such as will lay much balm to the American folksong collectors' souls. And after that, what? There is no way out of

it: the *study* of folksong must now begin, after decades of delay not shared by the study of folklore, which has gone on far in advance, in functional rather than mere formal analysis.

That no such study of English-language folksong has yet taken place, except in the rarefied atmospheres of the "communal improvisation" nonsense, will be found abundantly documented in D. K. Wilgus' recent *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship*, since Child. This work, finally, must content itself with offering, in justification of the word "scholarship" in its title—as differentiated from the narrow patriotism of regional collecting—almost nothing further than two overlapping studies of a single Child ballad, "Edward," and one more recent study of another, "Heer Halewijn," alias "Lady Isabel and the Elf Knight." One would, as a matter of fact, have thought that Child had already said the last word and more on the latter ballad, in his note No. 4, the opening gong of his whole collection and keynote to its method of treatment, with *thirty-two* pages of headnote on bride-murdering in all times and climes—three-quarters of which have nothing whatsoever to do with the ballad—to introduce *five and one-half* pages of text.

The final and most destructive misconception at large in the folklore and folksong field today is the dangerous idea that now that raw collecting has arrived at the point of diminishing returns, the mental strain of any necessary study and interpretation can best be taken care of automatically by the Big Brother of the vacuum tube, while the folklorist or folksong "specialist" lallygags gracefully with his prettier female students out in the hall. If there is one thing that is *not* wanted and not needed today, it is to set Ph. D. candidates, and other half-paid slaves, to counting syllables, feminine rhymes, and the melodic intervals of one hundred and forty-one musical settings of a single and identical ballad (Lady Isabel being murdered a hundred and forty-one more times, that is); tabulating fourteen numbered "traits" per folksong or tale, and an equal number of "motifs," each of which takes up fifteen pages of space in a learned journal (in very small type), and all of which is then to be juggled marvelously and mindlessly together so as to produce pseudoscientific "findings," on university money, if such is to be had.

The curse of folklore and folksong publication, as everyone knows, has been this endless doodling with the unimportant and nonsignificant paraphernalia of form—once the textual form, now the musical form—without any matching concentration on meaning and function; with no study, until barely yesterday, of *what the material means to the people who transmit it*, and not to the outsiders who collect it; what it tells us about their inner aspirations and their response to the lives they live. As far as sexual folklore is concerned, this complete overlooking of the essential, and concentration solely on the form, is tantamount to spending the entire wedding night examining the bride's trousseau.

Many scholars and their students wasted the first forty years of ballad study in America on the now utterly-exploded "communal origins" theory, with its open patriotic bias. After the same scant forty years of fruitful collecting, from 1900 to 1940—a major part of which was further wasted in America on reduplicative regional Child-ballad hunting, they made no psychological or sociological study whatsoever of the material collected, and precious little historical or textual study either. Now they are preparing to fritter away the rest of their brief hour upon the stage in an equally futile sort of boondoggling with the musicological minutiae of the tunes—Hollerith hole-punching machines in the university gymnasium, and all. That is the mountain

laboring and giving birth to a mighty small squeak of a mouse, no matter how many volumes of handsome musical calligraphy it may take.

With the recent and very striking exception of Alan Lomax's *Folk Songs of North America* (New York, 1960), by and large, the scholarly world of folksong study—folklore much less so—in both England and America, has funk'd its intellectual responsibilities, both as to what should be collected, sexually and otherwise, and that it must be *interpreted*, functionally not formally, vis-à-vis human beings and society. It has never actually got off the ground. It has leapt, without ever studying or attempting to study the human meaning of the songs themselves, from the Tweedledum controversy over their unprovable "origins," to the Tweedledee entertainments of "tune families" and the "melodic contour of archetypes," of which the "inner core of identity"—Bertrand Bronson's new *Ding am sich*—is to be determined by machinery. Shortly phrased, the fuzzy anthropological-metaphysical obscurantism of the eighteenth-century German and nineteenth-century Anglo-American university curricula, which produced the "communal origins" theory—not to mention the various *other* German racial theories that were produced—has now been revamped into a new inductive and permutational mysticism (in which the sum of the exploded parts is conceived to be not only the whole, but greater than the whole), and the electronic-mathematical gobbledygook by means of which the most dangerous antihuman and technocratic tendencies of the twentieth century are being peddled to itself as "findings."

Would it be pressing too far on the traditional license of this Feast of Fools celebration to observe that the study of folklore is not an American invention? It was begun in Europe—in Ovid's *Fasti* at the time of Christ, if not in the collecting of the Homeric legends by the *diacévastēs* under Pisistratus, five centuries earlier. Folksong collections were being published in France, in Germany, and Scandinavia in the sixteenth century, in England in the seventeenth century, in Scotland in the eighteenth, and in Russia and finally in America in the nineteenth century. The greatest monuments of folklore collection in all European countries of importance were erected and practically complete by the 1860's, before Child had yet published even his preliminary volumes—based on their inspiration—and decades before the first slave songs and children's songs were collected in the United States. Some of the most important field collecting had been done in Europe, as for instance by Herd before 1776, before there even *were* any United States. And European folklorists have not lost their lead. The leadership in folklore studies (on all subjects except sex, which is still relegated to frightened footnotes, as in Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index* at X700) still comes out of Finland and eastern Europe. Here is what one of the best folksong specialists in England today, A. L. Lloyd, had to say after coming back from a firsthand observation of how it is being done in Rumania:

In eastern Europe they have a better balance on these things. They don't ignore the measurement side of folklore studies (in fact they're better than Bronson at it!) nor would they disregard mechanical aids where they're available. But of course they don't stop there: they are much concerned with the life of the people they're dealing with—not only their economic and social life but their inner fantasy life too. As a consequence, they are able, for instance, to accept changing styles of folklore expression without consternation or dismay, and to make quite other judgments than merely esthetic ones, on the material.

It does not need demonstrating that the attraction of the pretentious futilitarianism

of syllable-counting and tune-measuring, dealing as it does only with the textual form or the musical vehicle, and never with the actual subject matter, nor with the human needs this subject matter satisfies, is precisely that it is *meaningless*, and therefore—insofar as not “jeopardizing one’s position” is concerned—guaranteed safe. The sages of Swift’s Lapúta made this sufficiently clear, in the “thinking-machine” invented centuries before them by the religious logician, Raymond Lully. Sages of this kind believe that their position is impregnable, because it is essentially a position of standing guard over nothing. Even so, they are wrong, as the future history of folklore and folksong study will show. Even when the subject matter is not “safe,” as with Kinsey’s sex studies, the preferred mechanical, mathematical, and manipulatory method of treatment betrays the futilitarian bias, and the *need to deal with human phenomena in a nonhuman way* (the so-called Finnish method in folklore), in plain words *to treat people as though they were things*. Thus the researcher is given the illusion of domination and control—of having reduced by machinery the inexact and unpredictable humanities, such as art, poetry, sex, and music, to an exact “science,” which is then to be prostituted and commercialized in the market place, and in which the awaited next step is, of course, that the machinery itself should create as well as perform the music, sex, poetry, and art.

Sexual folklore is, with the lore of children, the only form of folklore still in uncontaminated and authentic folk transmission in the Western world. It has thumbed its nose for centuries at both censorship and print. It has proved unavailable to the enwhoring and embalming of commercialized “popular culture.” It needs nothing and it wants nothing from pseudoscience and the process-cheese mashing of plastic brains. If real science cares to concern itself, at this very late date in England and America, with sexual folklore, it would do well to come with its mortarboard off, with clean hands, and with a sense of unwonted sacredness, in the presence of what is—for all its barbaric and sometimes dirty tatterdemalion—the central mystery and the central reality of life. And it would do well to take warning from the motto on Provençal sun-dials: “Make your way—the hour is passing.”

La Clé des Champs

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